

Bike/Walk Midland: Power Chair Safety

There a number of residents of Midland who use power chairs for personal mobility, and they face significant challenges as they navigate through their daily lives. Power chairs are not specifically regulated by any city ordinance or state law, and therefore power chair users are generally treated as pedestrians from a legal standpoint though there are no restrictions regarding operating them in the street. Power chair users do face different issues than those walking or riding a bike on the sidewalk.

One of the biggest challenges for power chair users is winter. Many sidewalks are not cleared, and many that are cleared are not wide enough for a power chair. The curb cuts that allow wheel chairs and power chairs to cross the street in summer are often filled with a pile of ice left by snow plows, and so crossing the street from the sidewalk becomes impossible. The result is that even a fully cleared sidewalk may not provide mobility for a power chair user, and so they must use the street.

Drivers need to be aware that power chairs may be in the street, and so must be alert for these slow moving "vehicles." The area around Eastlawn Plaza (Washington, Saginaw, Eastlawn) has a high number of power chair user residents, as does the downtown area near Riverside Place.

Power chair users must take steps to make themselves as visible as possible through the use of safety flags, "slow moving vehicle" fluorescent triangles, reflectors, and flashing lights. Studies have shown that the safety flags can get "lost" in the visual clutter a driver sees on the street, and so should be augmented by flashing lights to maximize safety. Bike shops are a good source of economical strobe lights (red on the rear, white on the front). Power chair users on the streets after dark need to take extra precautions to make sure they are visible and multiple flashing lights at different heights and widths are the best way to do this.

For more information: www.midland-mi.org/government/departments/planning/Planning/planninghome.htm